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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Parent Services Program offered at Saint Joseph's School for the Deaf (New York) which has a 92% minority population student body. The Parent Services Program utilizes three social workers to meet emotional and informational needs of the parents, through work with the immediate family initially and subsequently the extended family. Specific meetings focus on informative topics related to deafness or topics related to parents' feelings. Parents are grouped according to age levels of the children. Programs include a class in Exact English Signing, an English as a Second Language group, and an Evening Support group. Additional services include van transportation to meetings and a monthly newsletter which addresses deafness, deaf culture, and community services. All aspects of the program are designed to help parents become active participants in their children's development. (DB)

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PRESENTATION AT

THE SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON EDUCATION OF THE DEAF

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK, U.S.A.

PARENT ED I Presentation: 2:45 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.
Tuesday, July 31, 1990

"Parents as Partners in the Education of Deaf Children"

Presenters: Therese J. O'Connor, Executive Director
Maria Szabo, C.S.W.
Idalia Mapp, A.C.S.W.
Linda Norton, C.S.W.
Katherine M. Rivera, R.N., Parent Outreach Coordinator

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Attachments:
Introduction
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Presentation at

The International Congress on Education

of the Deaf July 29 - August 3, 1990

Reference: Parent Ed I Tuesday, July 31, 1990
2:45 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.

"Parents as Partners in the Education of Deaf Children"

Introduction: Therese J. O'Connor, Ed.M., Executive Director

History of Parent Education at St. Joseph's School for the Deaf

St. Joseph's School for the Deaf has been a landmark in the Bronx, in New York City and in New York State since 1869. It has had an educational, professional, social and moral influence on deaf children and their families throughout all these years.

This impact has been maintained because the school has focused on the needs of the students in the present moment. As the surrounding area changed from farm land to suburb to city, the curriculum and outreach programs have changed as well. They have always remained active.

Thus, as we observed and studied the situations surrounding the lives of our students and their families in the last few years, we saw the urgent need to develop a more effective Parent Education Program, both for the sake of the children and for their parents and siblings. Our school has a 92% minority population, reflecting all the social, cultural, bilingual and economic upheaval in society today.

In some instances, because of our school program, the young deaf child may be the one member of the family receiving adequate care but, at the same time, the least understood by the family. Long term goals are often non-existent. It became evident to us, while we were reaching our goals on a school level, more had to be done with parents to support the components of the overall program.

The traditional Parent Education model was mainly based on a teacher-student or professional-client model. Training sessions were offered, the information was given out and the recipient, hopefully, used both. It was not as effective as it could be nor did it attract large numbers of attendees.

We felt that we had to develop a model of Parent Education that really made the parents aware that they are true partners in their children's education. The school had to recognize their interests as well as their problems. This helped them to feel welcome as equals in the educational process. Early intervention and prevention became essential parts of this model. The skills of Socal Services' professionals helped the model to gain momentum. They recognized the needs and responded with expertise.

To do this, we had to give more attention to cultural issues, to transportation, to follow-through after meetings, to basics of how a school functions and how to approach the system. These issues were crucial to establishing a baseline level for this model. In other words, we had to create a positive, accepting atmosphere in which the minority parents are contributing members.

Parent Services Model

Maria Szabo C.S.W - Supervisor

A Parent Services Model was developed using the combined leadership of the three social workers employed by St. Joseph's School for the Deaf under the guidance of the Executive Director.

The current direction of social work at St. Joseph's School for the Deaf is to provide services through a holistic approach, including Preventive Intervention on the Infant Program level, a service which is a major trend in school social work practice. In this Parent Services Model,parents and Social Service staff work together to establish the bond between home and school, through the parents' involvement in an education process and through clinical and concrete social services.

The goal of the Model is that by meeting the emotional and informational need of the parents, they become empowered to take an active part in their children's education, and thus become partners with the professionals who are teaching their children.

The program was designed with an appreciation of the individual's and family's dynamics, characteristics and culture in the process of working through their feelings of having a hearing impaired child. To assist the parents in the process of learning of the developmental and special needs of their handicapped child, the main trust of our effort was to adhere to the principles of adult learning which is related to needs and goals. Parents want to participate, the are open to receive emotional support and willing to learn necessary information helpful to them and their children, but their need is to be talked with and not talked to. They need a program which is dealing with specifics and not with generalities, a program which appreciates the individual dynamics of the person, the family interactions and characteristics, the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual diversity of these families.

The statistics of the ethnic background of the children attending St. Joseph's School is:

Hispanic	56%
Black	31%
Asian	7%
White	6%

To inspire and promote parental participation, the primary focus of our Program development is on the immediate family and later on the extended family, their culture and language. Through group work, recreational and social events, parents are encouraged to learn about and integrate different values and customs.

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The involvement and leadership of social workers in the Parent Education Program, facilitates not only the children's but also the parents' learning in a school setting. This focus also emphasizes therapeutic aspects within the Parent Groups and is a new challenge to school social work.

Program Focus

Idalia Mapp A.C.S.W.

In the new mode of working with the parents of St. Joseph's School, the focus is on the educational and emotional components.

Educational purpose: An informative topic related to deafness, the child's behavior, the child's language and questions, hearing aids and/ or general information in which parents might be interested is suggested by leader or parents.

Therapeutic: Topics deal with different issues related to parents' feelings and the emotions of having a handicapped child. Parents' pain, sorrow, guilt and also any issues that come up during the meeting are considered, e.g. how and in what form parents were told about their child's hearing loss from professionals (doctors, audiologist, social worker, nurse, etc.).

The impact of the meeting on each individual person within the group becomes meaningful in different ways. Beginning with the initial contact of each parent (new or old member) in the group, it appears that each individual joins the group with some degree of suspiciousness, discomfort, mistrust (this is true for any group), however, even though the focus is supposedly on their children most of the group meetings are focused on their own feelings. It seems that their anxiety is more closely related to not wanting to feel that their problem and/or child's problem is of an isolated nature, but one that others might also be experiencing and want to share.

During the course of the meeting, it does not matter if the purpose is of an educational or therapeutic nature, issues dealing with parents' feelings regarding having a handicapped child, always surfaces. Why? Because no matter how much a parent is able to deal with having a handicapped child or how old this child is, there is always some level of pain that is present. This is a "normal" regular and expected reaction. This is why social work intervention as related to the group dynamics is an important therapeutic and educational component of this model and helps to make it effective.

Observing an incident, a group for parents of hearing impaired children helped develop increased awareness of the needed dynamics. The purpose of that meeting was to discuss hearing aids (care, usage, benefits, etc.); it was a very good and informative topic. At the end of the presentation, a father of a child said, "Sometimes I feel like killing myself when I think of what is happening to my child". It happened that the father's feeling of hopelessness, hurt, anger, depression, etc. was very difficult for the group leader to deal with, and the comment was ignored. Focus was made on other issues.

Emotional issues are what Social Workers can immediately spot in the groups, and quickly deal with feelings and emotions as they come up. This parent might not be the only one who is feeling this way. Social Workers can work with this in the group and if it is needed, work with the parents on an individual basis.

In essence, the expanded role is to lead, to support, to encourage, to advocate and above all to empathize with the parents in their effort to care for their hearing impaired children.

Program Organization

Linda Norton C.S.W.

This is a unique program servicing parents in partnership with the school. This partnership is a combination of shared ideas with parents and the school. Parents get to meet administration people, such as the Director, Principal and Educational Supervisors, and to discuss ways to understand each other better. Educational Administrators review the structure of the school and explain the many ways to keep the lines of communication open. One way is to call or write in order to get together and communicate. This exchange works both ways. It is our experience that misunderstandings usually occur when people do not listen to each other. Culture plays a part in how to view a situation and respond to it. Taking the time to be sensitive to parents' concerns and to express the school's perspective on ways to handle a situation. Our uniqueness comes from looking for creative ways to strengthen the bond between the home and school.

This bond develops through a variety of programs that take into account the many cultures making allowances for similarities and differences. This is done by building a program that is sensitive to the group needs at home and in school.

The programs are broken down according to the different age levels of the children. These include Deaf Infant Program (DIP ages 0-3), Pre-Primary (ages 3-6), Primary (ages 7-10) and Middle Elementary (ages 11-14).

The parents of Primary and Middle Elementary students meet on Wednesday and concentrate on parents sharing information and building a trusting relationship with each other. This is accomplished over coffee (given by school) and bread (brought by parents). There is a formal agenda set up and informal one that is addressed when parents have specific concerns. Part of the time (1 hour) is spent on discussions and information sharing. The other time (1 hour) is spent on learning Exact English Signing by a licensed interpreter. Parents learn total communication with their children by learning sign language using facial expression and encouraging use of the voice. The parents use themselves as teacher of their children.

The Thursday group is an ESL group. This is a program where parents are empowered by learning English giving parents the confidence to speak for themselves and be advocates for their children. The school responds to the parents by offering this program for two hours every week. This program is a direct response form the school to the parents who expressed a desire to learn more for themselves. It was the school's willingness to reach out to the parents by offering this program that makes our model so unique.

The school responds to the parents and the effect is that the parents respond to the school. The partnership builds as people begin to feel comfortable with each other and develop common goals. Experience brought from home are stored at school and vise versa. Parents and the school then begin to use the same language, mutual respect and understanding.

Last but not least is the Evening Support Group. Parents unable to attend day meetings meet to discuss their concerns once a month. The format is similar to the Wednesday group. The school provides the place at a time that is more convenient to these parents. What makes our program work is that parents and the school officials know they can count on each other to be flexible and available.

A trusting relationship is the ultimate goal.

Program Effectiveness

Katherine Rivera
Parent Education Coordinator

In the past, the Parent Educator role was limited primarily to addressing either educational or emotional needs. A background that includes being a teacher assistant for the deaf, sign language instructor, certified interpreter, a coordinator of health services for the deaf and a family member with roots in deaf culture, brings experience to my role that helps it to be more effective. Involvement with the deaf community creates a sense of trust and understanding between the parents and the team. With trust and confidence established, the parents feel they are accepted and needed by us. This is an important part of our goal.

As Parent Outreach Coordinator, "reaching out" brings this and more to the parents. Seeing the various needs which arise in the groups, sharing these concerns with co-workers enables the team to facilitate mutually devised programs. When ideas emerge from parents and the social service team, these ideas are made a reality, and build a foundation for groups expansion.

One example of this is seen in the monthly Parent Newsletter. Information regarding deafness, deaf culture and services in the community and general interest items are collected and organized in this paper. Parents contribute to the paper, as well as utilizing the information provided. The newsletter is written in both English and Spanish, to reach our multicultural population.

Community resources are tapped on a regular basis to keep our parents up-to-date on any activities, workshops, or classes that will enable them to enhance their child's world. Some of these resources include: Bellevue Hospital's Outpatient Deaf Services Program, AT&T Special Needs Center, N.Y.S.D., other 4201 schools, libraries, deaf professionals, etc.

Through our meetings, parents are encouraged to become active participants in their child's development. Guest speakers on various topics are provided through a mutually agreed upon theme. These topics cover a broad range that include emotional, developmental, cultural and social needs. The parents are given the opportunity to ask questions, as well as share individual experiences with each other. Food festivals are coordinated to lend a social atmosphere to the meetings. Parents cook their favorite dish, and share recipes with each other. Parents as parents gain from this type of exchange.

Sign language classes are given following each meeting, so as to facilitate growth in their communication ability and consequently with their child.

Through this process parents develop particular goals. This year they decided upon a trip to Gallaudet University. The parents felt a need to understand more about deaf culture. They made plans and held fundraisers. Parents assumed responsibility and control for achieving their goal.

This model program is made more accessible to our families by two very important aspects of planning. The first is transportation. Parents are serviced by our school van from three key locations. This increases attendance at our meetings. The second involves a child care program on site, so siblings are occupied with structured activities which include sign language stories and games, while parents are participating in the meetings. A volunteer conducts these activities. The volunteer, a parent, has been encouraged to resume her schooling through newly gained confidence, an added plus!

A major factor in the success of our program is the follow-up contacts I make. Flyers and newsletters announcing meetings and special events are sent home. Meetings are organized with a personal touch for the parents through phone calls. When parents are unable to attend meetings, calls are made to find out if everything is okay. Thank you notes are sent home to show appreciation. Recognizing the need for this social contact enhances our relationship as partners.

Parent Coordinator is the link that enables the service model to function on both a theoretical and practical level.

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"Parents as Partners in the Education of Deaf Childen"

This model is proving to be a viable way of meeting students' and parents' needs and helping to more fully integrate the whole process. It is a living, growing model that can, because of our team approach, continue to change to make the school a place of learning for all.